

AUF DE SUCHE NACH DER GUTEN SCHULE: IN SEARCH OF A GREAT SCHOOL*

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Abstract

This module is the result of the author Michael Chirichello's visit to Luxembourg in 2008. He includes the contact information here for the Atert-Lyce Redange principal or director: Claude Boever, Directeur, email: directeur@alr.lu This publication aligns with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) Standard 1: "An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders."



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Figure 1

Directeur Claude Boever

1 Introduction

In a country of 476,000 people that live within 2,586 square kilometres, Claude Boever never imagined that he would have the opportunity to be a director of a new secondary school in Luxembourg. In September, 2008 his dream became a reality when Atert-Lycée Redange opened its doors to 360 students in grades seven and ten. Through a selection process, the Ministry of Education appointed Claude as the first director of Atert-Lycée Redange, a secondary school that would eventually house 1200 students in grades 7-13. Claude was a former secondary school physical education teacher and the Professeur-Attaché for Secondary Education, a position he held for six years at the Ministry of Education.



Figure 2

Claude assembled a team of 16 teachers, social workers and school leaders in January 2006 as the school was being designed and constructed. With the Ministry of Education's approval, Claude selected the members of this team. They worked closely with Claude to create a vision for Atert-Lycée Redange that would make it unlike any of the 30 other secondary schools in the country. These pioneers started their conversation by asking themselves one essential question- What makes a great school?

Manuel Bissen, a member of the team and a teacher finishing his two-year probationary status at another school, completed his required thesis to qualify for his permanent teaching license during this planning period. His thesis (Bissen, 2005) focused on the same essential question- what makes a great school? In his analysis of the literature and surveys that were distributed to secondary schools in Germany, France, and English speaking countries. Manuel identified the characteristics of great schools. The team pondered over each of these characteristics and how to apply them to Atert-Lycée Redange. They included: (1) establishing a clear vision and mission statement; (2) developing the whole child with a focus on providing opportunities for academic and social responsibility; (3) providing continuous professional development to improve teaching strategies; and (4) engaging the entire school community through collective leadership. The team wanted to be sure that their vision would become a reality in a centralized system controlled by the Ministry of Education. The planning team's challenge was to create a unique school environment that was different than any other secondary school in Luxembourg.

2 The Windmill; Our Vision and Mission

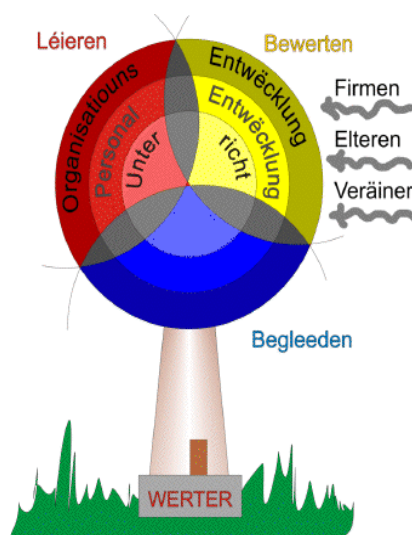


Figure 3

The team's vision for Atert- Lycée began to emerge. They chose a symbol to represent their school- a tall, colorful windmill sitting in a pristine, green field of grass that would serve as a landmark for the surrounding communes. The windmill was anchored to the ground in a huge cement block. The block represents the core values of the school- life-long learning, continuous assessment, and individualized support for students. The blades of the windmill- the organization of the school, on-going professional development, and excellent teaching- would turn continually to energize this learning community. The blades would be driven by the wind- partnerships with the business community, the parents, and cultural and recreational opportunities- each supporting the education of the whole child.

The founding team's mission statement emerged from its vision- Atert-Lycée Redange is a learning community that believes it must meet the individual learning needs of every child. We value life-long learning, continuous assessment of learning, and individualized support for our students. We will organize our school's learning plan around these values and provide continuous professional development for our teachers that will focus on teaching strategies. We will develop mutually beneficial partnerships with the

business community, engage our parents in their children's learning, and develop our school as a cultural and recreational center for the surrounding communes.

3 Developing the Whole Child: A Focus on Academic and Social Responsibility



Figure 4

Atert-Lycée Redange strives to develop the whole child by providing opportunities for his/her academic and social responsibility. Academically, each student is regarded as an individual learner. The teachers have high expectations for students' academic success and provide support for underachievers. Teachers are optimistic about each student's capacity to learn. Students are beginning to assume personal responsibility for their learning. Teachers regularly assess for learning (formative assessment) to determine if students' understandings are deep, shallow, or stalled (Brookhart, Moore & Long, 2008).

At Atert-Lycée Redange the schedule was developed with these academic goals in mind. Each seventh grade student learns German, French, mathematics, social studies, science, physical education, art, music, and religion or ethics. Tenth grade students continue to learn German, French, English, mathematics, social studies, and science, and begin to specialize in the study of administrative, social-medical, or technical professions. To meet the demands of this challenging curriculum, students participate in a coaching period each week. Each class of students is divided into three smaller subgroups. Each subgroup works with a teacher-coach. Teacher-coaches assist students to learn how to learn and develop their skills as collaborative student-coaches. For example, during the coaching period, a student who is more competent in French may help a student who is less competent and needs support in this subject. The student being coached may help the student-coach in another subject in which she is more competent. The teacher-coach assumes the role of facilitator during the coaching periods. This process supports not only the academic growth of the students, but also their social growth. Students work together and develop personal responsibility for their learning with teacher support (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

Each class of students has a Fola period three times a week. The Fola or follow-up period is part of the process that supports personal responsibility and social interactions. All the teachers who are assigned to what we would describe as a homeroom class develop a series of follow-up activities to reinforce student learning outcomes. Students have 135 minutes weekly to work collaboratively during these periods to help one another. Teachers become the guide on the side rather than the sage on the stage. The Fola provides reinforcement for learning. It transfers the coaching skills into another context. Although this process does not replace homework, it results in less homework during the school week. As a result, students have more time to expand their social development by participating in recreational activities and school sponsored teams.

Each day students have a twenty-minute break in the morning and a ten-minute break in the afternoon. This is a social time during which they may choose to eat a snack or have conversations with their friends as they walk around the school's open areas and corridors. Students have one-hour for lunch. After eating in the restaurant (a name deliberately chosen by the planning team), they are free to go outside, stay inside to socialize, or go to the cyber cafe, which is organized by the tenth grade students. These opportunities develop student responsibility and self-control.

In many schools, students rarely have opportunities to develop personal and social responsibility, however, teachers are often perplexed when students act irresponsibly. This is an oxymoron! At Attert-Lycée Redange, learning depends upon personal responsibility and increases as students advance through the grades. Unless schools provide a culture which values personal responsibility, students will continue to act irresponsibly. Developing responsibility depends upon the opportunities we provide for students to make personal decisions about their own learning (Gutsky & Anderman).

4 Good to Great Teaching: Continuous Professional Development



Figure 5

Beginning in 2006, the planning team had several opportunities to visit other secondary schools and participate in professional development sessions lead by experts in their fields. Even though the school opened in September, the staff already participated in several professional development activities. During his visit in November, Professor Chirichello spent three days at Atert-Lycée Redange. He presented a workshop that focused on developing and sustaining a professional learning community. During the second day, he introduced several teaching strategies including conceptually designed curriculum. This design gives teachers and students opportunities to dive deep and uncover the curriculum rather than tread shallow waters and simply cover material (Erickson, 2007; Henderson & Hawthorne, 2006).

As a result of continuous professional development, the staff is implementing cooperative learning, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction. In Gene Bindels' classroom, a seventh grade math teacher, his students were organized into seven groups. Two groups worked on solving the same math problem using the strategy of concreteness fading (Goldstone & Sakamoto, 2003). The groups compared and contrasted their solutions. Soon it became evident to the students that there was more than one way to solve these problems. As students from other groups listened to each of the solutions, they raised additional questions that were focused on analysis and evaluation more than knowing and understanding. Students were uncovering rather than covering the curriculum.

In Jo Spielmann's tenth grade German class, his students were engaged in a lively debate about wearing school uniforms. The student-spectators posed challenging questions to the debating students who had to defend teacher-assigned roles rather than debate their own point of view.

There were several times during the debate when laughter filled the room. Students were enjoying their learning. The teacher assumed the role of facilitator during this German language lesson.

Claude Boever believes in continuous professional development. "It energizes the learning community and reinforces its core values," he stated. "Our goal is to have students engaged in the learning process. Student talk should predominate over teacher talk."

5 Collective Leadership: Engaging the School Community

Leaders of great schools know when to push, when to pull, and when to let go. "It's like flying a kite," said Claude Boever. His vision of a leader is not like a conductor on the podium. He believes that the school is more like the Orpheus Chamber, an orchestra without a conductor, or a jazz ensemble. Like the members of a jazz ensemble, great leaders know when to lead, when to follow, and when to get out of the way.

Initially, the founding team began to discuss shared and distributing leadership. The team members pictured an organization whose structure would look more like intersecting circles rather than lines and boxes. When the school opened, teams of teachers were assigned to groups of students. The teams work closely with the director and deputy director. Within the next few months, the founding team will be replaced by a leadership team. In addition to the director, deputy director, and head of the special needs services, five teachers representing the seventh and tenth grade faculty, as well as the special subject teachers, would become the



leadership team.

In addition to the leadership team, teachers meet regularly in their department teams, their grade level teams, and their student teams. The students' school day ends at 12:30 PM on Friday to give the teachers time for these team meetings. In exchange for this early dismissal day, the teachers agreed to begin each

day at 7:30 AM and end at 3:30 PM.

Within the next few months, the director will begin to organize the Education Committee, an advisory group that will participate in discussions about the school budget, new programs, innovations, and other educational related issues. Two parents, four teachers, and two students will meet with the director and deputy director to give them continuous feedback. Once the Education Committee is formed, it will decide if it wants to expand its membership and include community and business representatives.

During the planning and building phases, Claude organized a task force to assist in the design of the school and its programs. Its members- business representatives, the mayors of the ten communes served by the geographical boundary of the school, parents, and a member of the Parliament- discussed curriculum, the organizational structure of the school, and the core values that would make Atert- Lycée Redange a great school. This task force formed four sub-committees- public relations, library development, business partnerships, and the social committee. The latter will begin to plan evening social activities for the students who are too young to travel into the city of Luxembourg.

Claude Boever is moving from an individual approach to a collective approach to leadership. He views leadership "...as a process that happens throughout the organization through interdependent decision making." (Martin, 2005, p. 3) Leadership becomes the collective activities of the school community. The Director realizes that the day-to-day challenges that he faces require him to rely on his staff. In this context, leadership becomes a process during which leaders and followers build trusting and influencing relationships among themselves to bring about successful transitions and continuous improvement that will benefit student learning outcomes. During this process, leaders and followers will exchange roles. Leaders will become followers and followers will become leaders much like a jazz ensemble. Everyone knows when to lead, when to follow, and when to get out of the way.

6 In Search of a Great School: Atert-Lycée Redange

The leadership team and the staff at Atert-Lycée Redange have a clear vision. They developed a powerful mission statement. They are becoming a learning community. They have the capacity to collaborate. They continually ask, What's so? So what? What's next? Their action plan is evolving as they continually regroup and reflect. They take time to celebrate their successes and learn from their mistakes. They have created a risk-free environment in which everyone is focused on student success (Chirichello & Richmond).

"The journey in search of a great school will lead us down the path that has not yet been travelled in Luxembourg" exclaimed Aly Trausch, Deputy Director. He has a passion and excitement that reverberates throughout the school. Often working twelve hours a day along with his Director, Aly has not lost sight of the school's mission. He believes in Atert-Lycée Redange and continues to make it all work.

The building's design is open and inviting. Its campus is pristine in the mist of the village of Redange near the Atert River. Its students enter and leave the school with a synergy that you can feel as you stands near the entrance way in the morning and afternoon. Mady Delvaux-Stehres, Ministre de l'Education nationale, shared her hopes and aspirations with Professor Chirichello during their meeting at the Ministry. She is supportive of the school's plans and will be watching with anticipation as this journey unfolds. Gerard Zens, Professeur Attache, who works closely with the secondary schools at the Ministry, expressed his enthusiastic support for this new secondary school that will eventually be the learning center for 1200 students in grades seven through thirteen.

And the glue that holds this new secondary school together is its Director, Claude Boever. He is an optimist, a risk-taker, and a relationship builder. He frequently leads by walking around and takes the time to speak with students, teachers, and support staff. The sparkle in his eyes and the smile on his face says it all- Claude is in search of a great school!

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